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Taking design to the street:
reflecting on the use of temporary urban interventions as tools for co-designing public spaces

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This article contains a reflection on the practice of using temporary urban interventions to help facilitate the co-design of public spaces. It presents case studies of two public space improvement projects, both of which used temporary urban interventions to co-design public spaces in various ways. This research was undertaken through practice and subsequent reflection on that practice whereby the authors were fully-embedded members of the design teams associated with each of the case studies. Following the completion of the projects, we analysed how these specific urban interventions performed as co-design tools and concluded that such urban interventions have much to offer urban design practitioners seeking to develop public spaces through a co-design approach. The case studies detailed in this article also reveal a range of possible modes through which temporary urban interventions can be deployed as co-design tools. We explore the opportunities and challenges presented by each of the modes and we offer practice-based guidance to practitioners wishing to use urban interventions as co-design tools.

Introduction

The practice of creating temporary interventions in public spaces of cities gained in popularity after the 2008 financial crisis. With new-found time on their hands, through redundancy or reduced business, architects, artists and designers across the globe began to experiment with urban interventions as a way of questioning, reframing and contesting prevailing understandings of public space, thereby creating new meanings, relationships, situations and associations in the city (Zeiger, 2012). Contemporary urban interventionist practices are informed by the work of the Situationists, which was in turn informed by Dadaist and Futurist art practices. In a bid to disrupt the conventions of everyday life, these latter practices displaced and relocated art from inside the established gallery space out into public urban contexts. Often, urban interventions constitute more than mere decorative additions to the public space. Being acutely context-specific, they are able to highlight particular, specific qualities of the surrounding physical or social environment, the function of that environment, and the power structures inherent to it. In this way, these urban interventions aim to encourage the users to reflect and comment on the spaces with which they engage, opening up new ways of reading the city and thereby provoking fresh conversations about shared public spaces (Lehmann, 2009; Klanten, Feireiss, 2010). While some urban interventions are merely thought provoking, others seek to improve the functionality of public space while simultaneously commenting on a perceived deficiency in that space, such as is the case in acts of DIY urbanism and tactical urbanism (Deslandes, 2013; Finn, 2014; Douglas, 2014; Lydon, Garcia, 2014; Lydon, Garcia, 2015).

Although the broad variety of contemporary urban interventions has been extensively documented (Thompson, Sholette et al., 2004; Klanten, Feireiss 2010; Bishop, Williams 2012; Beekmans, de Boer 2014), there has been only a limited critical consideration to date of the employment of urban interventionist practices as tools for co-designing public spaces. We argue, however, that urban interventions, when used in this way, offer significant opportunities. We develop this argument through the presentation of case studies that show public space improvement projects which

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employed urban interventions in this capacity. These case studies demonstrate the ways in which urban interventions can open up design discussions with diverse audiences and thereby enable the designer to garner the creative input of people who may otherwise have not engaged with the regeneration of public space(s). The reflection section of this paper presents a variety of modes through which urban interventions can be operationalised as co-design tools. We highlight the challenges and opportunities associated with each of these modes and we offer guidance to other public space co-design practitioners wishing to use urban interventions in this capacity. Before proceeding, let us first establish and clarify key terms and how they are understood in this article, as a way of contextualising the research.

Public space and collaborative urban development

Firstly, it is acknowledged that *"the public"* is not a generic group of people. Rather, there are multiple and diverse *"publics"* – different interest groups with varying characteristics and types of influence. These groups tend to gather around issues of common concern or places of common use. Secondly, it is acknowledged that public space can be understood in two distinct ways. In a procedural sense, it is a space where these multiple publics can become involved in considerations about issues of common concern and, in a physical sense, it is the accessible landscape, outside of the private domain, which includes locations such as public parks, public squares, waterfront developments and streets (Iveson, 2011). The latter understanding of the term is the subject of this research. Although public space, in this sense, can be viewed as a mediating zone between private worlds, it is not necessarily the opposite of these private spaces or spaces of ownership. Rather, it is more akin to "*intrapersonal space"* where strangers mix and intermingle with each other. Authentic public space is fully open to and inclusive of all members of society; it is in shared ownership and is controlled by public authorities. If it is produced and managed by an elite group of people, it will merely become exclusive. Therefore, as a way of defending the authenticity of public space, regeneration programs should be inclusive of all stakeholders and should allow for their substantive involvement (Madanipour, 2010).

Ideas concerning such a collaborative model of urban development have been the subject of much debate since the 1980s (Allmendinger, Tewdwr-Jones, 2002). Collaborative planning seeks to formulate new and shared cultural conceptions of place by using an inclusive, dynamic and responsive approach. This approach incorporates multiple types of knowledge, including tacit knowledge, that issue from the various audiences that use public space (Innes, Booher, 2004). Collaborative urban development processes aim to integrate the input of all of these different audiences and to offer them the opportunity to interact with one another, while simultaneously allowing all parties to act independently (Healey 1997, Allmendinger, Tewdwr-Jones, 2002; Innes, Booher, 2004). There is no definite collaborative planning methodology. Rather, the approach advocates that certain principles be adhered to and that unique processes be created or adapted to suit local contexts (Healey, 1997). Co-design offers an apt framework for thinking about how to collaboratively develop shared public spaces. A co-design approach stipulates that projects are developed *"with"* rather than *"for"* the end-user. It is an iterative design process that sees the end-user involved from the moment of inception. With each iteration, the project definition, the scope of the design and the project outputs all evolve and are continually refined (Sanders, Stappers, 2008; Steen, 2011).

Numerous tools have been developed to date that aid a generalised co-design process (Buley, 2013; Curedale, 2013; Polaine, Løvlie et al., 2013; Kimbell, 2014). In addition, many community participation methods have been devised to aid urban design and planning practitioners (Sanoff, 2000; Hofmann, 2014). That said, despite the existence of these tools and methods, the co-design process is still typified by a designer working with a defined user group in a private space. It is a context of invited participation and so, these co-design tools and methods are not fully inclusive of the full spectrum of audiences that use public space. We argue that urban interventions allow the designer to gain access to such heterogeneous groups because these interventions are implemented in public space and are therefore visible to the multiple public that use those spaces. In this way, such

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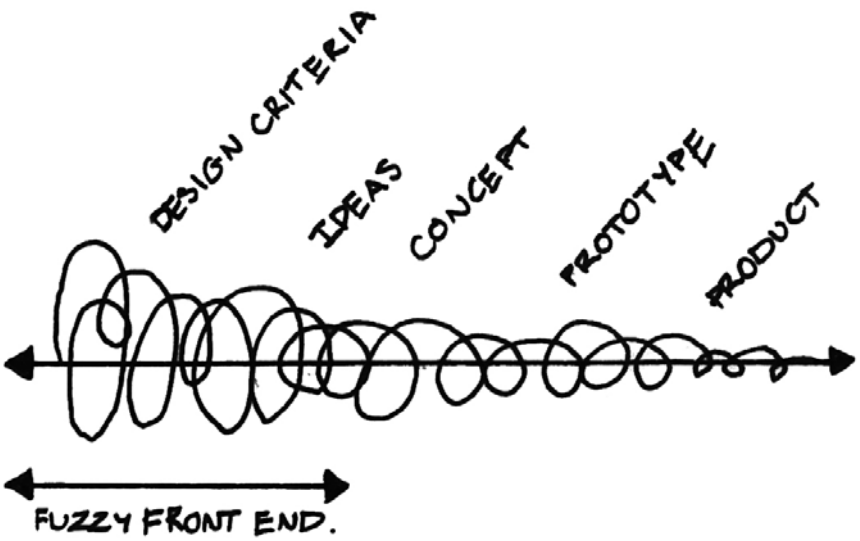

Figure 1 The co-design process as conceptualised by Sanders and Stappers (2008).

urban interventions have the potential to garner interested audiences that might not otherwise know about the public space improvement project.

Methodology

This research develops an expanded understanding about how, and in what capacity, urban interventions operate as co-design tools for public space improvement projects. It does this through the examination of two case studies, both of which variously employed urban interventions to co-design public spaces. The authors were fully involved in these projects, both as designers and as researchers. Therefore, the key insights brought forth by this paper have been arrived at via a combination of research through practice (Verbeke, 2013; Lucas, 2016) and the subsequent reflection on that practice (Schon, 1983). This research can thus be also understood as *"research into design"* by way of *"research through design"* (Simonsen, Bærenholdt et al., 2010). We undertook the analysis of how the urban interventions operate as co-design tools by using a process of constant comparison, whereby we identified key themes, reflected upon them and finally honed them, through an iterative process.

Case Study 1 – Love the City

This case study describes how a public space improvement project called *"Love the City"* used urban interventions to engage people in the revitalisation of 500m² study area located in the centre of Dublin, Ireland. This project was undertaken in 2010 by Designing Dublin, a not-for-profit, multidisciplinary design research organisation, under commission from Dublin City Council. At the time, Ireland was in a deep economic recession. Across Dublin's city centre, there was a sharp decline in general footfall and a rise in building vacancy rates which led to an overriding perception that the city lacked vibrancy and vitality. Prior to the arrival of the recession, Dublin City Council had committed to a city development plan that shirked conventional top-down approaches in favour of the employment of a collaborative approach (Dublin City Council, 2010). Given this commitment, the Council commissioned Designing Dublin to tackle the issue of city centre decline specifically because the organisation employed a co-design approach (Ahuactzin, Gough et al., 2011). The resulting project – *"Love the City"* – focused on the revitalisation of the Fruit Markets Area, a particularly neglected part of the centre of Dublin. Although located on the edge of a busy commercial district, the Fruit Markets Area received limited pedestrian traffic, remained unknown to many people and had an abundance of vacant and derelict properties. Love the City's goal was to create a series of prototypical and context-specific urban improvement projects for the area that would catalyse its regeneration (Liedtka, King et al., 2013). Approximately 1,500 city stakeholders, including local residents, businesses, organisations and local authorities, gave input to the co-design process and 70 people made major co-design contributions throughout the co-production of the project prototype.

The Love the City design team kicked off the design process by creating a series of ten urban interventions – over a one-day period – that reacted to the situation of decline in the city centre at the time. These physical interventions were constructed simply and quickly, using whatever materials were to hand in Love the City's design studio. The interventions ranged from the temporary renaming of tram stops with witty titles; to using posters to cover existing, unimaginative and uninspiring signage in the area; to creating performances in the public space. For instance, with morale in the country being very low, one of the urban interventions involved the staging of a *"positive protest"* outside Parliament buildings. The design team marched around the perimeter walls with placards bearing slogans such as *"Isn't cake great?," "My friend*

Figure 2 Images from the *"positive protest"* enacted by Love the City

fancies you" and *"Everything is pretty all right, really!"* This installation gained media attention and helped raise public awareness of the initiative. At each intervention, badges and postcards advertising Love the City and the project's website were given to passers-by. The aim was to increase the project's network of supporters with the hope that they would continue to participate in the project as it progressed in the future. Through these urban interventionist activities, we cultivated a Twitter following of over 4,000 people.

At a later stage in the design process, after carrying out desk research and interviews with key city stakeholders, a further series of temporary urban installations were created. This series aimed to stage interactive visual events that would entice the public to enter into conversation with the design team, thereby articulating their thoughts and feelings vis-à-vis the decline of the city centre. Placed at strategic points throughout the city, these interventions targeted specific user groups while still remaining open to participation from non-targeted groups of people. Permanent spatial and physical characteristics at each site were used as both inspiration and backdrop for the design interventions being executed. For instance, the balustrades of a busy pedestrian bridge were festooned with hundreds of blue ribbons thus enticing the attention, curiosity and interaction of the passers-by. Members of the Love the City design team positioned themselves at each end of the bridge and invited people to write on the ribbons, what they felt were assets and deficiencies in regard to the study area. After two hours of this, the design team had garnered input from 120 people.

Figure 3 Images from the pedestrian bridge intervention

In another such intervention, an outdoor living room was created under a canopy on a busy thoroughfare. The intention was to present a scene that did not typically belong in this area, again as a means of provoking passer-by interest. Those members of the public who did stall and show interest were invited to sit down and drink tea in exchange for writing their answers to a series of intentionally open-ended questions about the city and its decline. Over a period of two hours, the design team had garnered the input of 105 people.

Given that different groups use different public spaces in the city at different times of the day, a mobile urban intervention was also created. This mobile unit, which took the form of a large cardboard table and sign inviting the passer-by to give input, could be transported from one street corner to the next and its unusual design and features were intended to be themselves the subjects and catalysts of conversation. In this particular intervention, fruit was offered in exchange for conversation and input. The reaction to this consultation process was positive. In some locations, people even queued up to have their opinions and thoughts recorded. One person noted that they had "never been engaged with in this way before." Over a period of three hours, the design team gathered the input of 270 people.

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All of the information, thoughts, feedback and ideas garnered from the conversations conducted at the various urban interventions detailed above were analysed and coded using the constant comparison method. We identified recurring themes in the data which related to the negative impact being felt by the study area and we created a series of eight projects to address those themes. These projects were individually tested in the study area using full-scale prototypes that were constructed simply, quickly and cheaply. These prototypes – also urban interventions in their own right – were realised in situ, at full scale, and in a public space over a one-day prototyping event. By prototyping in this manner, it was possible to simultaneously experience how each of the individual prototypes would interact with each other and with the context. The final eight prototypes included new public seating, urban gardens and a street pedestrianisation proposal. On site at each prototype, the design team invited passers-by to give feedback on the prototypes. Below are detailed descriptions of two of these eight prototype projects:

Early research in the project revealed that people had difficulty navigating through the Fruit Markets Area. As a result of this finding, a project called "The Golden Path" was created to address this issue. The Golden Path sought to make mobility in this area more legible and safer by temporarily pedestrianising the route from Henry Street, a busy shopping thoroughfare, to the entrance of the Fruit Markets Building. Given that this project had a physical impact on public spaces, it required local authority authorisation. After extensive negotiations with the traffic department, permission was granted but with significant financial outlay for the project. The cost associated with this prototype totalled €14,000, a figure which covered the closure of the street to traffic and the erection of crash barriers along the route. This prototype intervention subsequently caused a group of like-minded people to coalesce and form a lobby group to pursue the permanent pedestrianisation of the street.

Another theme identified from the earlier project research was that the Fruit Markets Area suffered from a lack of public seating. Drawing on the network of Love the City supporters, which had been established through the earlier urban interventionist

Figure 4 Images from the outdoor living room intervention

activity, an additional 17 volunteers were recruited to help construct benches, tables and chairs from wooden pallets found littering the streets in the locality. A temporary woodwork studio was created in an empty building in the area for the construction of the temporary street furniture. At each intervention in this prototype project, feedback about the prototypes was sought by the design team, via a survey.

Figure 5 Images from the fruit exchange intervention

Case Study 2 – Beyond the Castle

The *"Beyond the Castle"* project sought to create a framework that could enable people with a very broad range of experiences and expertise to give creative input into the regeneration of an 800m² city centre green space adjacent to Lancaster Castle, in the northwest of England. Beyond the Castle was part of a larger pan-European project called PROUD (People, Researchers Organisations Using Co-Design), funded by the EU through a program called INTERREG IV. While the regeneration of this prominent site had been a priority for the Lancaster City Council for some time, the Beyond the Castle project was itself born from an unusual request made by a man who had been highly frustrated by previous consultations processes concerning the redevelopment of this specific public space. The man in question asked the city council to *"stop consulting with us!"*. His frustrations stemmed from witnessing the same groups of people attending repeated consultation meetings in which they made the same observations. And yet, the man saw limited creative outcomes, progress or impact. In response, Beyond the Castle created a series

Figure 6 Images from the Golden Path prototype

of urban interventions, all of which aimed to engage a wider and more diverse constituency and to tap into the innate creativity of that broad constituency. Each installation targeted a different demographic, while at the same time remaining open to all participants. The process was facilitated by professional designers and saw a total of 2,500 people give input with 700 of those making an active co-design contribution. Thousands of ideas, perspectives, opinions, models, drawings and sound recordings were garnered (Cruickshank, Coupe 2013, Cruickshank 2014).

The first urban intervention in the Beyond the Castle project consisted of a large model of the case study area being placed on a busy thoroughfare in the city centre. Passers-by were invited to describe, on physical tags, how exactly they interacted with this area. Each tag was subsequently plotted on the scale model of the study area, at the specific location in that model referred to by the narrative on the tag. The design facilitators also asked for suggestions for future improvement to the study area. A key to the success of this activity was that it enabled various kinds of public engagement – from those pressed for time who could only jot a few thoughts down to those willing to stay longer and enter into deeper conversation with the on-site design researchers. Children were also encouraged to give input by recording their ideas through drawing.

The second series of urban interventions under the Beyond the Castle project sought to highlight the historical and physical contexts of the study area and to engage people in co-designing the future of the public space through storytelling. Below the 800m² of public green space are the remains of a series of roman forts of national archaeological significance. This intervention consisted of a series of eight interconnected, site-specific storytelling activities. In one example, an actor dressed as a Roman centurion explained the historical context to participants and invited them to use a wax tablet and stylus to describe their ideas about how this context might be incorporated into regeneration proposals. At a marshy part of the site, an actor dressed as a fairy trapped younger participants in her *"magic mushroom ring"* and told them they would be *"unable to escape"* until they documented one of their ideas for how the site could change.

At the end of the Beyond the Castle project, the full range of gathered data was exhibited in a local public building, where further co-design activities invited people to use this data as a starting point for making further proposals and ideas for regenerating the site. The results of this process were formally analysed, transcribed and coded (Cruickshank and Coupe, 2013). This analysis underpinned the eventual master plan for the development of the area up until 2020. Since the completion of the funded stage of the project, volunteers and community members have attracted continued funding to undertake further activities, such as major archaeological excavations. In this sense, the Beyond the Castle project continues to thrive.

Figure 7 Images from street furniture prototype

Reflection and discussion

Our active involvement in and reflection on the above case studies enable us to conclude that urban interventions can operate in a variety of modes within a public space co-design process.

Below are individual, detailed presentations and discussions of each of these modes:

Urban interventions as critique and provocation

While some of the urban interventions, such as the *"positive protest,"* can be understood as mere ephemeral critiques of public space, it would be a mistake to conclude that such activities do not have a significant impact on an overall public space co-design process. They can give the design team the opportunity to play with the context of the city, to generate an initial reaction to the design situation, and to become sensitised to the genius loci. In this sense, urban interventions as critique and provocation can be a particularly useful mode of practice at the initial stages of the design process. Furthermore, they can help to establish good working relationships within design teams while allowing them to become accustomed with the specific urban interventionist practices being deployed. More importantly, such urban interventions are useful because they provoke the observant passer-by to question their own surrounding environment and they serve as an initial invitation to members of the public to follow the development of the project via social media and/or the project's website.

Urban interventions as cultural probes

Some of the urban interventions can be understood as urban-scale versions of cultural probes. Cultural probes are research toolkits given to users to analyse an aspect of their lives that is unquantifiable. The aim of cultural probes is to provoke inspirational and unexpected responses, and to glean new insights with a view to opening up a space for new cultural forms and new forms of pleasure (B. Gaver, Dunne et al., 1999, W. W. Gaver, Boucher et al., 2004). The information obtained from the returned cultural probes should serve as the foundational inspiration for further design work, rather than merely as data to be analysed (W. W. Gaver et al., 2004). Urban interventions can be used in this capacity – again in the early stage of the design process – to deconstruct the design situation and to open up new ways of understanding the public space from the end-users' perspective. While the intervention itself can set the scene and form a backdrop for such probing activity, it is also critical that a device for effectively capturing the participants' input, such as a questionnaire or workbook, is integrated into the intervention.

Urban interventions as alluring conversation openers

The case studies detailed in this paper demonstrate that urban interventions can act both as events through which to entice people into conversation with the design team and as illustrative props for use during those same conversations. These case studies confirmed our expectation that

Figure 8 The first Beyond the Castle urban intervention with a detail of the type of contribution made by participants

locating ourselves in highly-visible public spaces would allow us to engage with audiences that we may not have otherwise had access to. A number of members of the public, who had engaged during interventions led during both case study projects, noted that they had never before engaged in a public space design process.

Unexpectedly, the case studies reveal that the activity of making the physical intervention – for example, attaching the hundreds of blue ribbons to the railing of the pedestrian bridge – drew more attention from the passers-by than the finished installation did alone. This finding echoes observations made by Whyte and Gehl asserting that what attracts people to public spaces in cities is other people (Whyte, 1988, Gehl, 2010, Jacobs, 1962). Their observation suggested that using theatre and performance as part of the installation, as demonstrated in Beyond the Castle, is an effective way of attracting interaction.

Public spaces in cities are used by different audiences at different times of the day and at different times of the year. Urban interventions can target specific audiences depending on where the interventions are staged. Therefore, allowing the intervention to be mobile increases its effectiveness in attracting and engaging a wide, diverse variety of people.

We found that if the urban interventions are intended to act as solicitations to further co-design conversation, this intention should be clearly communicated from the start. Suitable signage is critical in this regard, clearly expounding the purpose and aims of the urban intervention while explaining it's relationship to the larger, overarching regeneration process it is a part of. The signage should also explain how participants' inputs will be used and processed.

Urban interventions as proposal prototypes
Urban interventions as prototypes is a mode that is capable of communicating the complexity of a proposal for public space improvement through direct experience by the end-user. Such prototypes can demonstrate overlapping concerns and perspectives while remaining easily comprehensible by the public, something the more abstract nature of a representative drawing or scaled model often fails to do. For instance, the *"Golden Path"* prototype clearly established how a pedestrianised street in the part of the city under study would look, feel and operate.

Urban prototypes can provoke focused conversations, asking people to look at the existing situation with fresh eyes and/or comment on a specific proposal. In this way, urban prototypes offer the opportunity to mobilise audiences around issues of common concern, by creating a shared physical setting for dialogue and setting the stage for debate. As tools for the extrapolation of shared values, they can help people make sense of the future together. They can be seen as *"agonistic experiments"* or socio-material assemblies that gather heterogeneous stakeholders and artefacts as a way of triggering impassioned debate about matters of common concern (Björgvinsson, Ehn et al., 2012).

The urban prototypes mode employed in the *"Love the City"* project aimed to try things out simply and quickly, using whatever materials were free and at-hand in the design studio. We observed that this rough aesthetic was important for encouraging interaction from the passers-by, signalling to them that the proposal on view was a trial and not a finished product, thus leaving them room to interpret, comment and suggest improvements on what they saw.

Urban prototyping is not only an appropriate tool for testing ideas, it also aids urban revitalisation, particularly when multiple interventions are implemented simultaneously. This was demonstrated at the Love the City prototyping event, attended by some 300 people. The intensity of the prototyping activity drew people out onto the street and initiated a broader conversation about the future of the area of the city under study. The event also allowed people to assess the potential effect that each prototype intervention might have on the other interventions.

The relationship between urban prototypes and the long-term development of the city requires significant further consideration. If urban prototypes are to be seen as legitimate tests of more long-term proposals for improvement to the city, then a legitimate method of evaluating urban prototypes needs to be established.

A systematic way of measuring the impact of users' reactions to urban prototypes needs to be formulated. Furthermore, by their very nature, certain interventions will need statutory permission. In such cases, it is critical to engage with the relevant planning authority at the prototype development stage.

Creating urban prototypes as public engagement tools is a demanding and time-consuming undertaking. Additionally, prototypes that have a physical impact on public space – such as was the case with the *"Golden Path"* project – are likely to require statutory permission and a modest financial outlay. Despite this caveat, urban prototypes are an effective way of testing a proposal idea, prior to its costlier, permanent implementation.

Urban interventions as a network-building tool

All of the urban interventions cited in this paper helped to build a network of project supporters and to raise the profile of the overarching regeneration project. This network of public support is critical for a sustained public space co-design process.

Conclusion

Our research has demonstrated that urban interventions can be used in a variety of modes to aid in the co-design of public spaces, particularly at the *"fuzzy front end"* of the design process. Each mode offers specific outcomes to aid the co-design process. Through our practice-based research, we offer a nuanced understanding of how each mode operates as a co-design tool. While we acknowledge that urban interventions are not suitable for building a space for sustained collaborative effort, we assert their significant value as an effective tool to lead towards a more sustained, collaborative effort.

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Figure 9 A Roman Centurion helps to stimulate the imagination of participants and the swamp fairy encourages children to submit their ideas.